2: Sanders E-5 (no date) 1949 EE1 Bulgaria EE1

CHAPTER V

THE COURTSHIP AND WEDDING

WHENEVER I asked a man or a woman "How did you come to marry?" the response was always the same. After an embarrassed laugh, the person would say, "Oh, it's so long ago. I have forgotten. I have not had time to remember such foolish things." Then would come a quick look at me from dark eyes that never seemed to lose their brilliance even when the broad face was sagging, deeply lined with the years. "You really want to know?" First it came haltingly; then soon the man would drop the harness he was mending or the woman would lay aside her distaff to give undivided attention to the story. I needed to do little prompting. My interruptions were usually questions about attitudes toward courtship or marriage in general.

There was never any self-pity, even among those women who had been stolen. Even for them something bright had flashed across their days. And for all—"It was so long ago, I thought I had forgotten. There has been much work." From all their reminiscences, stripped of their meager romance, there emerged the village conception of marriage.

Marriage was expected of young people in Dragalevtsy and was an affair which they usually handled in a matter-of-fact way. The peasant youth did not trouble himself as to whether he should or should not marry. He simply concerned himself, sometimes much and sometimes little, about whom to marry.

A woman who had not married by her twenty-fifth year was considered an old maid. People began to wag their heads and ask: "Why doesn't Vesela marry? She's a nice looking girl. There must be something wrong with her about which we do not know." As a matter of fact, in 1937 there was only one peasant girl over twenty-five un-

2:Sanders E-5 (no date) 1949 EE1 Bulgaria EE1

582 208 married in Dragalevtsy. Because she had a physical deformity her parents had given up all hope of marrying her off since they knew she would be unable to attend properly to her housework and field work. During the first World War there were two old maids in the village who had not been chosen for marriage because each of them had a goiter. A doctor with the German forces cured the goiters [554] and these two unmarried women became desirable prospects, one of them marrying a priest's son in Sofia, one of the highest prizes a village girl could capture in her matrimonial venture.

[208] [562] 581 Since public opinion made life miserable for unmarried women, even a girl of independent temperament looked upon marriage as an inevitable event, especially if she stayed in the village. With men it was different. They could choose to remain unmarried and not lose prestige in the community. People only said: "Well, Asen simply doesn't want to marry. He's a bit shy of skirts, you know."

The young men to whom I talked were outspoken in regard to those qualities which they looked for in choosing a mate: good health, industry, efficiency in the house and field, and proper care of the person. The girls, on the other hand, had little to say regarding the qualities they wanted in a husband. They seemed willing to accept whatever luck brought them. But marry they must.

584 574 883 There were many ways in which the husbands and wives had become acquainted with each other. If both had been born in Dragalevtsy, as was the case with a little more than half the couples, they were already aware of the other's characteristics either through personal acquaintance or hearsay. Many of the married couples had played together as children while tending the cattle in the sun-drenched pastures, only to become distant until most of the adolescent period passed. Then began frequent meetings at the fountain at sunset, shy flirtation at the *horo* and *sedenki*, or rambling conversation on the way to and from the Friday market. At the *sedenki*, held by the young people in various girls' homes on winter evenings, games involving forfeits were played. At one *sedenka* I attended, the girl giving out the penalties sent a couple obviously in love to the dark outdoors "to see what the weather was like." A few minutes later she sent a second couple out to see where the first had gone. All four of the

2:Sanders E-5 (no date) 1949 EE1 Bulgaria EE1

562 "Suppose you wanted to go to market some Friday and your husband thought you ought not to go, what would you do?"

181 Not a single wife would dare go to market under these circumstances. Two or three said, "I wouldn't even start for the door."

593 "But suppose you wanted to make some small purchases in the city and your husband disapproved, what would you do?" Only two daring ones out of the thirty said they would make these purchases if they had money.

It paid the women to "behave," because the husband did have the right to beat a disrespectful wife. I never happened upon a wife-beating, but the fact that a few husbands told me with pride, "I never beat my wife," showed me that they considered themselves exceptional.

[208] A wife who received rough treatment, especially if her husband had been drinking, could go to her father's home. She could not stay 562 there very long after her mate had become sober, because her father 593 and the village in general made her feel that her place was with her husband no matter how disagreeable he might be. Usually she waited until her husband came with a meek promise of good behavior to ask her to come back.

In those formal ways a village wife showed respect to her husband. She did not, most of the time, find them burdensome because she knew nothing else. All of her experiences from childhood to [208] marriage had conditioned her to a subordinate role. Should any woman have tried to rebel against her lot other women would have been her most vigorous critics. They, more than the men, aided in the perpetuation of the existing order.

562 The woman, however, had a far more important place than the 581 social amenities would indicate. Men frankly admitted that they 593 could not make a living without their wives. This feeling of dependence overshadowed the traditional masculine superiority to the extent that a partnership resulted. The man, to be sure, was the senior partner, but he knew that he was a member of a team in which co-operation was essential.

This deeper sense of partnership was best shown by the practice husbands had of consulting their wives on every matter of importance as well as on minor matters. Out of twenty-six representative cases,

2: Sanders E-5 (no date) 1949 EE1 Bulgaria EE1

intelligentsia, when it came to the point dared not run counter to the old village sanctions against divorce. 586

More often it was the husband who left the home. When he did and in rare cases interested himself in another woman, the villagers did all in their power to make him return. If he refused at first, they made him feel the indignation of public opinion, treating him as an outcast and sometimes going to the length of beating him. If he remained in the village, he had no choice but to go back to his wife. During the time he was away his wife also was put to shame, getting little sympathy from the general public. She knew, furthermore, that in case of a divorce both parties would be held guilty by the villagers, so she was willing to take her husband back and get along with him as best she could. A divorced man was considered to have loose morals; a divorced woman would have been thought thoroughly bad. There was thus a situation in which everyone was expected to marry, with no sanctioned way out once the marriage contract had been entered upon. Though such an attitude meant that unfortunate marriages had to drag on interminably, it also had the effect of forcing couples to adjust themselves to each other. [208] ● [558]

Dragalevtsy seemed a curiosity indeed: a village in which marriage was little questioned, where there was practically no marital unfaithfulness, and no divorce. What were the reasons for the family stability? For one thing, life was still lived according to ancient customs. People only recently had begun to wonder about the age-old patterns which they had been following so faithfully. Some writers would call them the "dead hand of the past," others "the cake of custom." Whatever their name, they were conducive to a common understanding of the place of marriage. All the people expected the same things from life and from the home. 581 593 181 829

Then, too, earning their living by farming was a joint enterprise. People got used to putting their shoulders to the wheel as a family group. In addition to what they all did together, women were supposed to do certain things, men other things, and children still other things. As long as every person did his part there was no friction, but quiet efficiency. Furthermore, the presence of a number of relatives made for greater stability. In the case of apparent misunderstanding